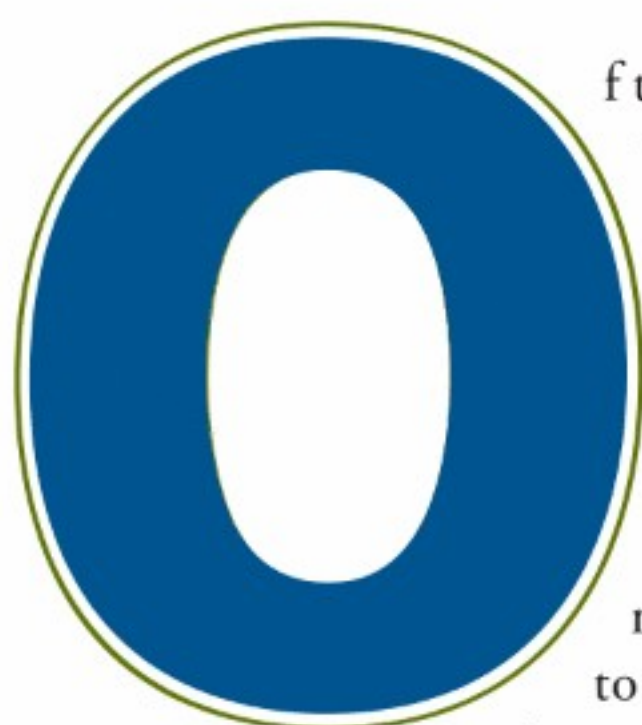


Been Around

Times have changed for these 'old-time' golf course superintendents, but they have no regrets about getting into the business

BY RYAN GRAFF



Of the 10 dozen or so ways a golf course superintendent can blow his budget, the phone bill usually isn't one of them. But a 19-year-old rookie can manage to wreck even that.

Just ask Ken Lapp.

Lapp landed his first superintendent job in 1955 at the Fresh Meadow Golf Club near Chicago. He had six years of experience working for his father at the nearby St. Andrews Golf Club, which was owned by Jemsek Golf, the same company that owned Fresh Meadow. He wanted to be a superintendent, but he was stunned nevertheless when one of the owners of

Jemsek Golf walked into the maintenance facility and asked, "You still want to be a greenkeeper?"

"I almost fell over," Lapp says. He took the job, "and I absolutely rang up the biggest phone bills calling my Pop and asking for advice."

Fifty-three years later, Lapp still runs courses for Jemsek Golf, though now he watches over the Cog Hill Country Club, a four-course club in Lamont, Ill., where he has been the superintendent for 36 years.

Lapp has company as self-professed "old-timers" who supervise courses around the country. There's Terry Bonar, who has worked at the Canterbury Golf Club in Cleveland for 47 years, 25 as superintendent. And Riley Stottern, a 42-year

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OLD-TIMERS AT A GLANCE



Who: Ken Lapp, 72.

Got his start: Working under his father at St. Andrews Country Club in Illinois.

First superintendent job: Fresh Meadow Golf Club in Illinois at age 19.

Secret to his success: "You've got to have, and I was lucky to have, an understanding family and an understanding wife. Because when you get in extreme weather, you're out there seven days a week."

Best part of the job: "Working outdoors. You work to get the place looking the best you can get it."

Advice to superintendents: "Make sure you know what you're getting into. [A lot of young guys] don't see me after they go home at 3:30 p.m. I may be out here until 9 p.m. if something's going wrong. They don't see that."

PHOTO COURTESY: COG HILL COUNTRY CLUB



Who: Terry Bonar, 67.

Got his start: Canterbury Golf Club in 1961 after graduating in the second class ever from the turfgrass management program at Pennsylvania State University.

First superintendent job: Canterbury Golf Club in 1984 after a few years serving on the crew, four years serving in the Air Force and a few more years as an assistant.

Secret to his success: Working at a tournament course that kept him busy — Canterbury has hosted the 1973 PGA Championship, two U.S. Amateurs, four Senior TPCs and a U.S. Senior Open while Bonar's been there. And he's preparing for the 2009 Senior PGA Championship. Bonar says finding good people has also made him successful. "If you have good people who are happy doing their jobs, you can do anything."

Best part of the job: "When you leave that golf course in the afternoon, 99 percent of the time it's better than when you got there. You can look to see what you've done that day. And a lot of people never get to see that in the jobs they have."

Advice to superintendents: "Give your best every day. If you're a good person and giving your best effort, people notice that and it will take you far."

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member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, has run about 10 courses and is currently supervising the construction of Kokopelli Golf Club in Apple Valley, Utah.

The three superintendents have seen plenty of changes during their combined 148 years on the job. Lapp hand watered greens and tees long before he could sit at his desk and irrigate the 1,000 acres at Cog Hill with a few mouse clicks. Bonar cut greens at one-quarter inch long before he used a micrometer to measure blade height on his greens mowers. And each fretted about how to keep turfgrass both healthy and short long before the rise of plant growth regulators.

For the most part, advances in technology have made the game and the job better. These days, courses stay in such good shape year-round that if "you want to put a tournament on it, you just have to buff it out a little bit," Stottern says.

And it has leveled the playing field, so to speak. When he started, golfers without country-club memberships played lower-quality privately owned and municipal courses. "There used to be a separation," Stottern recalls. "But I think with the technology that the gap has closed and the demands placed on superintendents by golfers have gotten to the point where all golf courses are good now."

The career path has changed, too. "I came up from the
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old school, through the ranks,” Lapp says. “These young men now, they’re going to college, and they’re coming out well educated.”

Like Lapp, Stottern also came through the ranks under the eye of his father, who himself was the son

**If you want to do well
in this industry, then
get your degree in
business management
while you are taking
agronomy classes.
Then work for a good
superintendent who
can teach you how to
grow turf.**

of a superintendent. “Through the school of hard knocks, that’s how I grew up,” Stottern says. “My dad, he didn’t cut me any slack and he made me do all the jobs, and I appreciate that now.”

Both of these superintendents, though, note that either path taken these days is valid and challenging.

Bonar had a foot in each world. He started out in the second class ever at Pennsylvania State University’s turf-grass management program, but he had never worked on a golf course before. “I got good grades because I could memorize,” he says. “But I didn’t know a lot about what they were talking about. Having never done it, I couldn’t picture it in my mind.” So he dropped out for a year, went to work on a golf course and then finished his degree. Eventually he made superintendent at Canterbury Golf Club — the only course he has ever worked.

Not all the change in technology has been great for superintendents, though. “You’re always on a call,” Stottern says. “Back when I first got into the business, you could leave on a Friday afternoon and go play golf, and you didn’t have to worry about it until Saturday morning because nobody bothered you. Today, you’re constantly on the phone, even when you’re trying to play golf.”

And there are new demands on superintendents that they didn’t use to have.

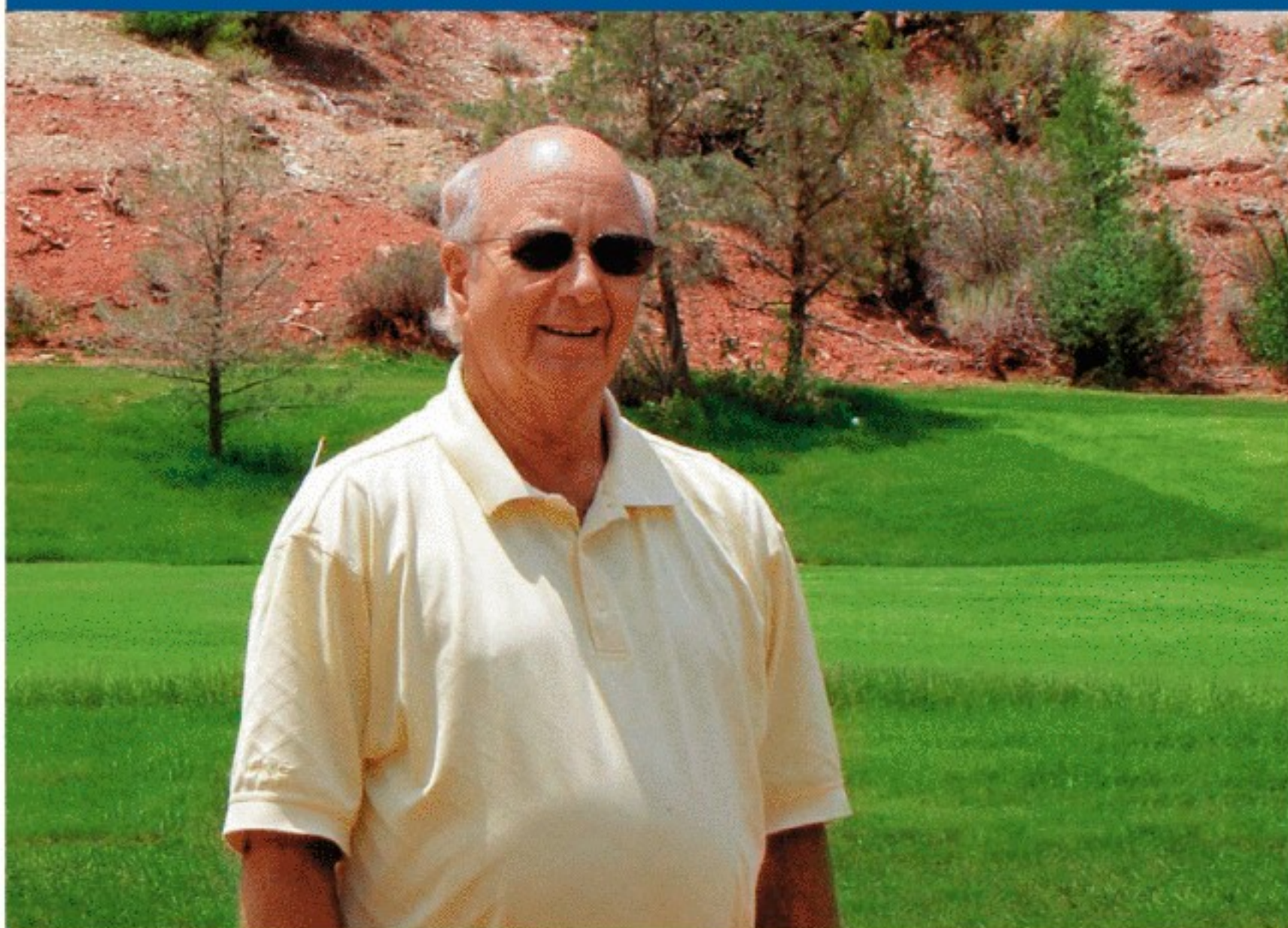
“It’s a business — you’ve got employees, you’ve got all the government regulations and so forth,” Stottern adds. “I used to jump on a mower and go mow six hours a day and help my guys out. We had a great time, and there were no problems. That doesn’t happen much anymore.”

In fact, these days, “when I get on a mower it’s a pretty good sign that maybe my crew ought to just stay away from me,” Stottern adds. “It’s one of those stress relievers, you

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The veterans you’re reading about in this story offer some sound advice to younger superintendents. *Golfdom* realizes there are plenty of veteran superintendents out there who might have some good advice to share. We invite you to send us your words of wisdom so we can communicate it to other superintendents. Send your thoughts and pointers to Editor in Chief Larry Aylward at laylward@questex.com.

OLD-TIMERS AT A GLANCE



WHO: Riley Stottern, 64.

Got his start: Working for his dad at Willow Creek Country Club in Salt Lake City during high school.

First superintendent job: Oak Ridge Country Club in Farmington, Utah in 1966.

Now at: Supervising construction at Kokopelli Golf Club in Apple Valley, Utah.

Secret to success: "I've been on golf courses down in the desert Southwest and also I've had a mountain golf course at 8,000 feet, so I've become very versatile on the kinds of turf and conditions and what needs to be done. I guess maybe that's made my worth a little bit more to owners and to people looking for someone to build golf courses."

Best part of the job: "There's nothing like smelling the fresh-mown grass every morning. Getting up early to watch the sun come up and seeing your golf course and being able to watch it grow."

Advice for young superintendents: "Go to school and get a degree in business management and take all the agronomic or science classes you can take during that period of time. Then go work for a good golf course superintendent who'll show you the ins and outs of growing turf."

know. When I'm on a mower, I usually don't have a phone on me or I don't have a radio with me, and I'm just out there enjoying myself for a little while."

Still, these "old-timers" have few regrets.

"I always knew I had a great job," Bonar says. "And then eight years ago the club bought me a dog. Now how good is that?"

Molly, a border collie, is on official

Canada geese duty, but she spends all day with Bonar. "Now I've got a buddy," he says. And "she's the best PR I've ever had. A lot of people didn't know my name, but they know Molly."

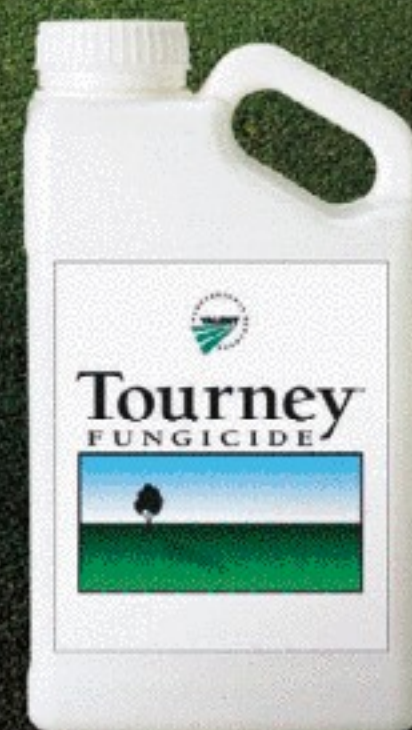
Lapp is similarly positive. "I've never regretted getting in the golf business," he says. "I love it. In this stage of life, I better love it." ■

Graff is a freelance writer from Chicago.

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